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ABSTRACT

The Dayton (Ohio) Public Schools have developed a comprehensive dropout prevention program to meet the needs of at-risk middle school students. The general needs of the middle school student were addressed through a restructuring of the middle schools that limited the schools to grades 7 and 8 and organized them into "cluster teams" to facilitate problem-solving. A pilot project is also testing a home-based guidance program designed to reduce student isolation and increase meaningful contact with adults. The special needs of middle school students who are 16 or older are being addressed through a community partnership initiative called the New Futures Program. New Futures combines the efforts of the following groups: (1) the schools; (2) business and industry; (3) city and state government; (4) human service agencies; and (5) universities. The following components are supported by a case management system that tracks and accesses the multiple support services: (1) collaboration with area universities; (2) mentoring; (3) intensive, sustained counseling; (4) access to social services; (5) accelerated remediation; (6) individualized planning and instruction; (7) school-business collaboration; (8) nontraditional settings, instructional methods, and scheduling; (9) parental involvement; (10) prevocational and vocational emphasis; and (11) innovative school completion options. (FMW)

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STUDENTS AT RISK: A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO DROPOUT PREVENTION

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On a continuum of risk for school dropout, the over-age student is clearly at the highest level of vulnerability. Students who are sixteen years old or older and below 9th grade level are at least four times more likely to drop out of school than their at-grade-level counterparts. The practical and environmental barriers to school completion for this disenfranchised population seem virtually insurmountable.

In spite of the extreme level of difficulty, we simply cannot ignore the problem. The costs of school dropouts are too high, both to the individual and to society. Even if young dropouts are able to secure jobs, their long term prospects for competitive employment are dismal. Placement in work environments with special supports (e.g., the National Supported Work Project of the late 1970's) generally has not had significant positive long-term gains in participants' earnings nor in their ability to secure and keep jobs. Further cyclical ill effects result from the inevitable linkage of school dropout, poverty, and criminal activity.

A significant percentage of the nation's prison population are school dropouts. The resulting economic effects are catastrophic. It costs six times more to keep one prisoner

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incarcerated for one year than to educate one child for one year in a public school. Still more tragic is the loss of human potential.

In the Dayton Public Schools, we became more acutely aware of the special needs of our most at-risk population through our own internal assessment and through a series of community forums addressing youth problems in a more general way. We determined that the most immediate interventions were needed at the middle school level. Thirty-five percent of the District's middle school students were identified to be at risk of dropping out, based on criteria established by the State of Ohio's Occupational Work Adjustment Program, which includes days absent from school, number of grades retained, grade point average, and other factors.

A sub-population at even higher risk was also identified. Within the middle school population, we found 310 students who were sixteen years old or older. It is probably not an exaggeration to expect 100% dropout among these youngsters.

The general needs of the middle school student are being addressed in several ways. The District recently completed a major re-structuring of the middle schools. They are now composed of only 7th and 8th grades and are organized into cluster teams; forming "schools within a school." Cluster teaching staff work as a team for problem-solving. An objective of the restructuring is to smooth the transition between elementary and high school. In one school, we are piloting a home-based guidance program in which students receive thirty

minutes a day of individual guidance. Through this project, we hope to reduce student isolation and to increase meaningful contact with adults.

The special needs of the at-risk student population are receiving attention through a community partnership initiative known as the New Futures Program. The Dayton Public Schools is fortunate to be the lead agency for a major five-year grant award from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The school district is a key participant in a whole-community plan to address the problems of academic underachievement, teen pregnancy, youth employment, and school dropout. Representatives of area business and industry, city and state government, human service agencies, and institutions of higher education are working collaboratively with Dayton schools' personnel in the multiple components of this project, which is targeting the middle school student in particular.

We felt that this unusual amassing of resources presented the district with an excellent opportunity to develop a focused program to meet the needs of students at the highest levels of risk. From reviewing research on dropout prevention efforts with this population, we were convinced that a successful program would need a comprehensive, integrated approach that would interlace multiple and mutually reinforcing components.

In designing our project, we initially looked at the unique difficulties presented by our target population. Their most obvious barrier to school completion comes from the age itself. The prospect of not graduating from high school until early or

mid-20's would challenge even highly motivated students; our population contains discouraged and defeated young people who are accustomed to failure, rejection, and avoidance of challenge. The stigma of being older than classmates cannot be underestimated. In surveys of dropouts from the Los Angeles area, 41% cited this along as their reason for leaving school.

A majority of such students can also be expected to be behind in basic skills, although not necessarily low in ability. The cycle of poor attendance, falling behind, poor grades, retention, and lowered self-confidence is self-perpetuating. The payoff for skipping school becomes greater than for sitting in a class where students do not understand what is going on and feel inadequate. It is little wonder that discouraged students describe school as being boring, confusing, and unresponsive to their needs. Undiagnosed learning problems and/or emotional problems may have contributed to the students initial falling behind. Whatever the cause, the end result is the same: the school is not "user friendly" to the potential dropout.

Some contributions to the hostility of the atmosphere are subtle. Jerry Conrath, author of Our Other Youth, a handbook for teachers of at-risk youth, describes classroom behaviors that many teachers are not even aware of exhibiting. For instance, when teachers call on low achieving students, they usually wait less time for an answer and/or cut off borderline answers. They are more prone to correct with the right answer rather than letting the student develop a better response from his/her tentative beginning. They give less praise and fewer smiles,

maintain less eye contact and demonstrate lower non-verbal responsiveness with the low achiever. The students' sense of inadequacy is further reinforced.

The students' problems continue beyond the school setting. Statistically, they are more likely to come from impoverished homes (frequently headed by a single parent), to have experienced abuse, to be abusers of drugs or alcohol, and to be involved with juvenile court.

We recognized that alternative school programs for dropout prevention traditionally have had lower success rates with the most dropout-prone students. In our project design we decided to build on the community relationships strengthened through the New Futures Program, and to work from recognized models that appeared to hold the most promise, combining and adapting them to fit our local situation. Component elements include:

- collaboration with area universities
- mentorships
- intensive, sustained counseling
- access to an array of social services
- concentrated acceleration of remediation
- individualized planning and instruction
- effective school/business collaboration
- specially selected and trained staff
- non-traditional setting, instructional methods, and schedule (flexible day and year)
- parental involvement
- pre-vocational and vocational emphasis

. additional and more attainable school completion options

These components need the support of an efficient case management system which tracks and accesses these multiple support services for program participants.

The school district applied for and received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education under the School Dropout Demonstration Education Assistance Program to implement a two-year project beginning in 1988. Although late summer notification of the award of the grant created logistical difficulties, we were able to get the program up and running at the beginning of the school year.

Structurally, we are operating the program at three satellite learning centers, each associated with area universities--Central State University, The University of Dayton, and Wright State University. The three sites are located on the university campuses. Each site serves twenty students.

There are several advantages to operating the program in cooperation with the university community. The physical removal of the students from the site of previous failures immediately presents them with a more attractive and supportive educational environment. Location away from much younger classmates also reduces stigma. The name selected for the program (The University Prep Program) has no negative connotations and, in fact, suggests many positive ones. One college campuses, participants receive broad exposure to positive role models. Students and staff also have access to university resources, both

academic and recreational. College students are working in the project as tutors and mentors, and program participants are able to use university facilities such as swimming pools and gyms, as well as visiting science laboratories, libraries, computer labs, and special exhibits or lectures.

The participating universities are providing free space to house the students. Steering committees were organized to help access university resources and serve in a general oversight advisory role to the project. There is little financial commitment for the universities and there are some benefits to them. These benefits go toward the traditional mission of universities. Their participation helps them meet a service obligation to the business and educational community.

Through the educational program, students work toward realistic options such as successful passage of the GED and employment or matriculation into a community college; return to comprehensive school at the sophomore level; entry into vocational training; or continuation in the alternative program for an additional year. The educational program is an extended day/extended year program which emphasizes individualized acceleration or remediation, conducted during non-class hours, such as on Saturdays. Students may also use reading and math labs for computer-assisted instruction during extended hours. A summer program is devoted to remediation and skills maintenance to upgrade basic skills and prevent summer learning loss. Students and their parents work with project staff on individualized educational plans which include contracts with

specific milestones. A comprehensive assessment of academic skills, vocational interests, and psychosocial development provides background information for development of the educational plan. Curricular emphasis of the daily program is on teaching and strengthening basic skills, conceptual thinking, problem-solving, and life management skills, and encouraging students to aspire to explore career and higher education options.

Along with the skills-based curriculum, students receive work force readiness and career awareness programs during the extended day. Courses are taught by vocational education instructors and supplemented by representatives of area business and industry. Our strong ties to the business community through the New Futures Program also facilitate outside job shadowing opportunities, field trips and employment and pre-employment experiences.

Each site is staffed by two certified teachers, one clinical psychology intern (pre-doctoral level student), and varying numbers of volunteer student tutors and mentors. The psychology interns, under university faculty supervision, provide individual and group counseling and specific training on development of social skills. Extensive use is made of preservice teacher education and counseling students, who work at the site for academic credit. All the sites are supported by a case manager who accesses, integrates, and tracks school-based and community services to program participants (e.g., health care follow-up, family counseling, etc.). Overall supervision of the project is

conducted by the Deputy Superintendent and the Assistant to the Deputy Superintendent.

An incentive program (individually developed at each site) is used to improve attendance, reduce negative behavior, and reward academic performance. All program participants and their parents also participate in the Toughlove Program, a nationally known model which directs at-risk children and their parents toward the goal of positive behavior change. As a part of this component, students are required to perform thirty-six hours of community service volunteer work.

The success of the approach is dependent upon the commitment and creativity of staff, who must create a new environment for students. They must be willing to explore new ways of thinking and learning and interacting with others. They must permit young people to make mistakes and provide support for them to try again. Desirable personal characteristics of program staff are tolerance and flexibility. In addition, staff must be supported by administrators who share these values, and who support experimentation and the acquisition of new skills by providing state-of-the-art materials, resources, and training.

Our approach to dropout prevention is not entirely revolutionary. Many of its component elements are ones that have been advocated as a part of the current web of school reform. Too often such components are fragmented and unrelated. For example, work adjustment training and academic tutoring may be separately carried out, with little communication between staff members. We believe that our approach is unique in that

it blends and inter-relates components for maximum continuity. It also focuses on an historically neglected population among disaffected youth--that portion of the population least likely to complete school or to return to alternative programs after dropping out.

Clearly we face awesome challenges. In 1987 Jacqueline Danzberger, Bernard Lefkowitz, and Andrew Hahn published a synthesis of research findings and program practices in dropout prevention entitled, Dropouts in America: Enough is Known for Action. We agree with the philosophy and spirit expressed in the subtitle. Even though our knowledge is not perfect and putting it into practice means taking risks and making mistakes, there is enough knowledge and experience base to begin effective programming. We are now ready to launch initiatives that may give vulnerable youth a critical last chance.